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*SIX BLACKBIRDS ON THE
HIGHWAY TO MOSCOW*

Petersburg! I don't want to die yet.
You know my telephone numbers.

Petersburg! I've still got the addresses:
I can look up dead voices.

—OSIP MANDELSTAM, "LENINGRAD"

ODE TO MY GULAG

This is my mind at night, January, a thousand miles
from Moscow, living in a hut with other dead souls
who've done nothing but try to find the place where the snow
meets our beating hearts, or maybe my mind is the comedian
on the median telling jokes for chump change, while four lanes
of cars whizz by and my dog bites at passing flies, my lies
like ice cream to him, or am I the fat girl with tattoos,
her muumuu lifting in the breeze as the whole world sneezes,

head cold on hold while the fat cats fold the cosmic radio
into their bankrolls, so where are we anyway, comrades,
the blizzard started in November, snow banking, the fireworks
melting nothing but the sky, its nuclear glow
mowing down giraffes who've escaped from the zoo,
though who do they think they're fooling, their necks
breaking the low hanging clouds, so how did I end up in here
at Monteverdi's *Ulysses*, Athena descending

from Mount Olympus on her silver couch pumping me up
to finish off the suitors and embrace my long lost dream
of the slumber party when I was thirteen, dancing to "Love,
Love Me Do," heart askew, my crew of girls
lost in the dream of fourteen and the birth of our waists,
and you know I'm through with this world when I forget
the radio of those years, sitting with boys in cars late at night
while some man from Detroit croons through the air,

singing about hearts crushed in the incinerator of love,
but what do I know about night or Detroit or boys
for that matter in my psychedelic space craft of the moment
that looks like a Chevy but is lit by the Milky Way,
rotating through a darker night than I've uncovered
in my existential dreams, the rack, the screws,
the Grand Inquisitor of all our back alleys, and what are dreams
but a cocktail shaker of the day, the gin of sleep,

a mixer of sin, with the olives of words dropped in,
or maybe dreams are an ironing board
in which the laundress of our brains presses out the deep
wrinkles of the day, and after four or five hours
soaking in the river of sleep, and drying on its banks—
we wake to the clatter of birds in the trees.

O inconstant brain that changes from day to day,
when the doors to my gulag open, will the road

be an impasto of mud and snow and blood, or will it be spring,
roadsides on fire with dandelions and wild daisies
growing in the leaves of grass, fed by dead bodies turning into soil,
the war over, treaties signed, the wounded trudging home
to their fires, their books, and cups of tea brewed with leaves
from the hillsides of our enemy, milk from cows
fed on grass, and honey from the hives of bees
who stung us once and are certain to sting again.

THE DREAM OF THE DACHA

You are walking in a deep forest of evergreens and oaks,
leaves muffling your steps, mud soaking
your pink satin shoes. Who wears silk shoes to walk
in the woods? You were at a party, drank
champagne and danced to violins, the notes soaring
like birds out of the open windows and into the summer
night, but that was hours ago, and now you are here.

You think there might be a path. You see it and then you don't,
but the moonlight comes from behind the clouds,
and its trail shimmers in the woods, and you think of *mangata*,
the Swedish word for the path moonlight
makes on water. Where are you? Russia? Who knows?
You are deep in a forest, and there are branches
you must push away, but they still tear at your dress,

almost like moonlight itself, and you hear small animals
scrabbling through the brambles on either side
of the path. In a fairy tale they would be escorts from their queen
who is waiting for you, has been waiting all your life
to show you how to crack the mirror of the present moment,
grow wings and fly into another world, a planet
where there are no doors or windows or walls,

but this is no fairy tale, and the animals have sharp teeth
that glimmer in the moon's reflection, and there are bears,
ferocious in their brown pelts teeming with shit and gnats and flies.

Do you know what flowers are at your feet? You can't see
the tiny white cups or yellow stars like scattered light. You
remember a poem, and you sing it as you walk,
gossiping with the stoat who is running alongside you,

and when you are most lost you see a light in the distance,
or maybe not. Perhaps it's a trick of star light
on the leaves or a hallucination from poisoned wine,
because your arms and legs are weightless, and you
are running now as if someone were calling to you
from the darkest part of the night. Is there a clearing
where the trees thin? Is that a cottage? Yes, oh, yes, it is,

and you knock at the door, and who answers? Your mother,
but her hair is dark, and she hasn't forgotten how to laugh.
She heats the samovar and cuts a slice of cake
or maybe makes a sandwich of black bread and butter,
and you sweeten your tea with *varenje*, a soupy jam
with whole apricots that swim at the bottom of your cup,
and your mother shows you the garden near the terrace

with its nine bean rows and tomatoes like rubies in the sun,
because it is day now, and your brother is there,
but he loves you again, and your sister is making mud pies
as she did as a girl, though she is older
and her hair is golden, and there is nothing to do all day but hunt
for blackberries and make jam or bake bread
or hike to the pool, swim, and dry off on the grass in the sun,

which is sometimes lost behind dark clouds that rumble
in the distance, and you smell the rain minutes before
it begins to fall and run back to the cottage, sit in a chair,
open a book, turn to the story of a grand estate,
a comet, a prince, and a woman who thinks
she knows her own heart but is only looking
through a window at a summer storm that might never end.

ODE TO PETERSBURG

Walking your czarist avenues in the rain, sky
 silver with midnight, your crazy alphabet marking
the walls with cryptic messages—for me or not for me
 that is the question, but what is it I want
from this wet evening, my body filled with Spring, dandelions
 like a thousand suns blooming in empty lots
and pavement cracks. O Petersburg, I have stumbled
 down your streets in my mind a thousand times,
down your bright canals floating with bodies, birds, stray
 papers, strolled down Nevsky Prospekt
with prostitutes, counts, and bedraggled students,
 murderous thoughts thrumming in my skull
like the hum of bees in a hive of cholera. I have stood
 with Akhmatova before Kresty Prison, its whispers
rising like a requiem in the nave of her ribs, have wandered
 in her garden at Fontanka, have watched spring
conquer the snow, read the postcards Brodsky sent his parents,
 his messages for anyone to read, and why not,
since the KGB was going to open any letter he wrote
 and steam it back again or not. O Petersburg,
I have sat in your cafés amid the smoke
 and absinthe, listened to Gumilyov foretell
his own death and everyone else's, too, walked beside
 your river bank, fished bodies from the fog—
mad clerks, men without noses, revolutionaries turned into gods,
 godless czars turned to science, and science turned
to torture. I have picked up the phone and dialed
 my mother's number just to hear her voice
among the living once again, opened the book
 of all my lost ones, the dead and the living, too.